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Using Vignettes to Explore Reality and Values With Young People

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Key words: vignettes; qualitative interviews; social science; normativity; higher education research; community cohesion

Abstract: There seems to be relatively little scholarship on the use of vignettes in qualitative research, despite their long-time application in these approaches. They appear to be a helpful tool for framing complex or sensitive topics, but there is also some disagreement as to what vignettes are and what they can/should be used for. In this article, we briefly review the literature on vignettes, identifying issues in what are often overly specific definitions and prescriptions for their use. Much of the literature focuses on the use of vignettes prior to data collection, or on the findings obtained in projects utilizing them. There is little to no consideration of how they are chosen/designed or the kind/s of data they help to produce. We will therefore focus on the choice, application, and participant responses to two vignettes from separate research projects that were undertaken to explore, in different ways, reality and values with young people.

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1. Defining Vignettes and their Use

Vignettes have been a feature of the social science research landscape for some time (RASBASH, LECKIE, PILLINGER & JENKINS, 2010), having been used to investigate topics across the disciplinary spectrum, from education (ÅKERLIND, 2005a) to social psychology (ALDEN et al., 2015) and from nursing (HUGHES & HUBY, 2002) to social work (WILKS, 2004). Authors claim that they offer a number of advantages, not least as a way of improving the validity of studies by better contextualizing or framing research topics (FINCH, 1987; GUPTA, KRISTENSEN & POZZOLI, 2010). They appear to be applied most often in surveys (see POULOU, 2001), but they have also been used to enhance qualitative interviews (e.g., BARTER & RENOLD, 2000). [1]

There is general agreement across the literature that vignettes' chief purpose is to provide entry points to what can be complex research questions as they

"selectively stimulate elements of the research topic under study" (HUGHES & HUBY, 2002, p.383). This allows particular factors around an object of inquiry "which may normally be relatively unconsidered or perhaps even highly routinized" (JENKINS, BLOOR, FISCHER, BERNEY & NEALE, 2010, p.179) to be highlighted, unpacked, and then interrogated by researchers and their participants. They can also be utilized to improve researchers' access to sensitive themes by creating distance between the context of the vignette and the participant, by not asking people directly about their own experiences, rather by asking how third parties might feel, act, or be advised to proceed in a given situation. In this way, for example, they have enabled researchers to broach topics such as family obligations (FINCH, 1987), peer violence in care homes (BARTER & RENOLD, 2000), and professionals' epistemological understandings (JORAM, 2007). [2]

There does appear to be some disagreement, or at least incongruence, between researchers as to what vignettes should/do consist of, which research designs they suit, and what they are designed to capture. In terms of a definition, they are described alternately as fictional scenarios (JENKINS et al., 2010; POULOU, 2001), simulations of real events (WILKS, 2004; WILSON & WHILE, 1998), or real-life stories (BARTER & RENOLD, 2000). (It should be noted that the term vignette has also been applied to describe researcher-generated, anecdotal data in autoethnography [PITARD, 2016] or as a narrative form of presenting research findings [ERICKSON, 2012].) For the more common usage as an aid to data collection, it is clear that many authors have found particular forms useful in their own studies. The obvious solution here is to use definitions more flexibly. In other words, we should avoid the application of fixed, static definitions of vignettes and what they are comprised of. For instance, instead of stating "what vignettes *are*," it appears more appropriate to inform readers about "what vignettes *can consist of*" in terms of the fictional, simulated, or actual situations that aim to be presented in—and examined through—the vignette, and that these can vary depending on the requirements of the project. Also, as HUGHES and HUBY (2002) identify, they are commonly textual but pictorial, video and other forms can prove effective. [3]

The same problem of over-specificity sometimes arises in vignettes' association with particular research methods by scholars. There is a common, implicit assumption in the survey-oriented literature (e.g., FINCH, 1987; HUGHES & HUBY, 2004) that they are only applicable to this type of research design. These and other authors (GUPTA et al., 2010) highlight how vignettes can increase the validity of surveys by allowing a foregrounding of the issues being explored. However, these authors also discuss how closed surveys may fail to capture the nuance in respondents' thinking, bringing into question whether participants have interpreted a vignette similarly, or whether differences in that interpretation can be established. The danger here is that the findings can therefore be seen to lack generalizability. [4]

Capturing subtlety, of course, tends to be less of a problem in qualitative research, particularly in well-designed, unstructured/semi-structured interviews

(KING & HORROCKS, 2010). Appropriately applied vignettes can afford researchers an opportunity to elicit rich and nuanced responses from interviewees. Furthermore, as ÅKERLIND (2005a, 2005b) notes, the express purpose of phenomenographic research (and, it could be argued, most interpretivist approaches) is to specifically draw out and analyze differences in people's understandings. Furthermore, vignettes in qualitative research offer researchers an opportunity to interpret participants' responses in alternative, more subtly distinctive—i.e., sociocultural—ways. As CRAFTER, ABREU, CLINE and O'DELL (2014, p.85) suggest, researchers should give priority when analyzing participants' responses, to their "subjective perceptions, feelings, and experiences" in relation to the vignette material, instead of the extent to which their responses represent reality. They argue that the dialogical cultural identities of participants, which can emerge through the interaction between the perception of self and the perception of others about one's self, play an important role in responses. Vignette methodology, as they show in their study, can enable researchers to capture this dialogical process. [5]

As for external validity, it has long been identified that this is neither the intention nor the claim of many—or perhaps any—qualitative researchers (GUBA & LINCOLN, 1994; KING & HORROCKS, 2010). These concerns around external (and construct) validity relate to well-established differences in methodological/philosophical paradigms. Depending on the research design used, the data will be different, and how it is interpreted will correspondingly vary according to the researcher's philosophical standpoint. In addition to the ontological point made earlier by CRAFTER et al. (2014) of the greater importance of exploring participants' internal dialogue rather simply than their interpretation of the factual accuracy of a vignette, O'DELL, CRAFTER, CLINE and ABREU (2012) raise a further epistemological issue related to this dialogue. That is, that researchers need to acknowledge the potential for the existence of multiple positions in participants' responses based on those participants' identities. In other words, participants may express different perspectives in response to the characters or context of a vignette. A specific voice—or certain voices—may be more foregrounded within a specific social context than others. O'DELL et al. suggest that we might explore how and why particular positions are more dominant, and whether there are internal conflicts between those voices (such as—in their study—teacher, friend, or parent). This could be evident in cognitive dissonance, for example, where contrary perspectives are held simultaneously. The kind of knowledge produced in exploring, or even charting, the nature, shape and role of these identities and voices would be more difficult to capture in larger scale studies, and would in any case be individually unique. To return to the broader point, though, vignettes are not *de facto* suitable for one approach and not another (although the data and its interpretation will vary), and broadening the definition to encompass a spectrum of research designs resolves this issue. [6]

Finally, a number of authors *define* vignettes as being oriented towards exploring participants'—or participants' understanding of others'—motivations, decision-making and actual/potential behavior (ALDEN et al., 2015; BARTER & RENOLD,

2000). This seems short-sighted when they also can be (and have been) successfully applied to help consider philosophical and normative questions around beliefs and values (FINCH, 1987; JENKINS & HEALEY, 2010; JORAM, 2007). As before, the simple solution seems to be to apply a less specific definition by allowing the focus to be determined in relation to the project rather than from a pre-determined perspective. [7]

It appears appropriate, then, to suggest a more inclusive description of vignettes than the literature currently does. With this in mind, but while hopefully avoiding pedantry, we therefore offer the following working definition: Vignettes are textual, audio, or visual artifacts consisting of fictional, simulated, or actual situations, which can be adapted and applied to a range of both qualitative and quantitative research designs. Appropriately utilized, they can serve as prompts to allow researchers to highlight, or focus on, particular aspects of what may be sensitive, complex, or even abstract objects of inquiry. [8]

In the remainder of this article we first consider some of the steps that can be taken in the application of vignettes (Section 2) before examining two projects in particular where vignettes were applied with some success. We, through these projects, explore—in different ways, and with different groups of young participants—people's understanding of values in everyday life. In one project, (Section 3) the values that German and English undergraduates associate with universities are under investigation, and in the second, notions of tolerance and community cohesion (Section 4). We outline each project in turn before addressing the application of its vignette and related findings. We then draw the article together in Section 5. [9]

2. Applying Vignettes

A range of steps that may improve the efficacy of vignettes are suggested in the literature. However, very few of the cited authors reported conducting research that compares the same/a similar research design with or without the vignettes (except, see McKEGANEY, ABEL & HAY, 1996). As such, it is not possible to state with any certainty whether the presence of any of these measures improves the quality of the study or the data. This is not to say that they are not useful, but rather that their usefulness is not guaranteed. Nevertheless, it would appear helpful to consider the following as a set of possible options researchers have found constructive in designing and applying vignettes. [10]

Firstly, HUGHES and HUBY (2002, 2004) consider it imperative that the vignettes themselves are internally valid, i.e., that they elicit the (kind of) data that enables a project's research question/s to be addressed. Achieving this can be divided into two separate but interconnected issues—topic, and participant relevance. The unanimous view in the literature is that vignettes can give focus to a topic, but that this only works if the vignette itself is clearly connected to the object/s of enquiry. Presenting too abstract a vignette that only indirectly relates to the themes of the research, for example, would add no value (i.e., validity) and perhaps even adversely affect the data collection. (This is, perhaps, common

sense, but as with many methodological issues, it may only be common sense once identified.) The possibility also exists, though, that drawing attention to certain factors within a vignette generates an artificial—and perhaps leading—framing of a set of questions or discussion (WILSON & WHILE, 1998). To clarify, the vignette may alter—in content terms—how participants might have responded without it. This is always a risk in social research and no data collection is entirely natural, but as JENKINS et al. (2010) point out, vignettes often form part of an exploration of aspects of social life that are taken for granted and not consciously unpacked. It could therefore be argued that, in such cases, and without a suitable vignette (or alternative strategy), researchers and participants could find it even more difficult to approach certain topics. This is part of the set of judgment calls that researchers have to make in assembling their research design, and several authors recommend piloting vignettes before using them for the actual data collection. This piloting may also be required to establish whether the vignette actually makes sense to the participants—and that it is relevant to them. That is, that participants can actually imagine whatever is being described, potentially placing themselves (or others) in that context, in order to respond to it. This includes using language appropriate to the audience (HUGHES & HUBY, 2004; JENKINS et al., 2010). [11]

Two other notable suggestions in the literature on vignettes relate to the nature of their content and their placement in the research design. In terms of the former, a number of authors indicate that imbuing a degree of ambiguity or even a moral dilemma into a vignette can serve as a powerful way of eliciting more in-depth responses from participants (BARTER & RENOLD, 2000; JORAM, 2007; WILSON & WHILE, 1998). This appears more suited to qualitative studies in that they can draw out the individual understandings, experiences, and beliefs that closed item surveys may struggle to capture. Finally, the location, or timing, of vignettes is raised as an important consideration in several papers (BARTER & RENOLD, 2000; FINCH, 1987). They can, for example, constitute the core of the interview from which all discussions follow (see JORAM, 2007), serve as an ice breaker, or be presented as part of a longer series of survey or interview questions. One study (McKEGANEY et al., 1996), presented a series of third-person vignettes about drug users' risk-taking, which steadily increased in complexity and elicited different (and potentially more honest, in their view) data from participants than a more direct questionnaire approach had. This could prove a compelling strategy in interviews where it is generally accepted that complex issues should only be approached after an initial phase of developing rapport and engaging/sensitizing participants with/to the topic (DICICCO-BLOOM & CRABTREE, 2006). [12]

It appears from the literature, then, that vignettes can be helpful in terms of obtaining certain kinds of data/participant responses that may be difficult to elicit without them. It is also suggested that their internal validity is improved—and this stands to reason—if they are relevant to both the topic and the participants, and that their placement within the research design requires careful thought. Many of the papers cited thus far have either focused on applying vignettes in principle, i.e., seeking to assert particular ground rules for their use, or on the findings they

(may) have helped to produce or elicit. What few have done is, in the first instance, to reflect on the source and nature of the vignette itself, at least in journal publications. Reporting on pilot studies was rare (although see O'DELL et al., 2012), and there is also little attention given as to the nature of the responses in methodological rather than substantive terms. In other words, the focus in research papers where vignettes have been used is almost exclusively on the data as it relates to a research question, rather than how the participants engaged with the vignettes. This, in turn, reflects an unsubstantiated assumption that the vignette was instrumental in improving the quality—i.e., validity/credibility—of those findings. In the remainder of this article, we therefore seek to explore, through two separate research projects, how two vignettes were sourced/created and applied, and how participants responded to them. These projects were selected for this article on two counts. The first is because both apply vignettes in qualitative research, which is rare or at least scarcely reported in methodological literature. The second is because empirical data on people's understandings of values also seems to be a somewhat neglected area of research. [13]

3. Vignette 1: Students as Customers?

3.1 Project overview

The project in which the first vignette was applied was a small, qualitative study about how students in Germany and England described and negotiated their national and local university contexts (BUDD, 2014). Thirteen domestic undergraduates were recruited from two research-intensive universities, Feuerbach Universität in Germany and Mill University[1] in England. Both universities were of a similar size (15-20,000 students), age (founded in the 1960s-70s), located in regional towns rather than major cities, and were comprehensive in their disciplinary range but somewhat STEM—science, technology, engineering, mathematics—oriented. Recruitment was purposive and convenient in nature in that participants sought were relevant to the object of enquiry and came from within the student body of the two universities (ROBINSON, 2014). The sample (see Table 1, below) comprised six male and seven female students, aged between 18 and 25, of varying social and ethnic backgrounds, studying degrees within science, engineering, and the social sciences. Each took part in a two semi-structured interviews, which as (KVALE, 1983, p.174) explains, are "neither a free conversation nor a highly structured questionnaire ... [but] which rather than containing exact questions focuses on certain themes." The interviews were designed to develop rapport and cover a breadth of issues such as the participants' social and educational histories, how universities functioned, and the values that they associated with higher education in general.

1 All universities and participants were given pseudonyms in line with the ethical and research access conditions of the project.

University	Name	Age	Gender	Main Subject of Study
Feuerbach	Ahmed	25	M	Politics
	Anna	22	F	Electronic engineering
	Lisa	22	F	Sociology
	Maxi	25	F	Sociology
	Michael	25	M	Sociology
	Thomas	25	M	Sport science
Mill	Chili	25	M	Civil engineering
	Elisabeth	19	F	Civil engineering
	Gemima	19	F	Sociology
	Jack	19	M	Civil engineering
	Jo	19	F	Psychology
	Marie	21	F	Physics
	Zachary	19	M	Mathematics

Table 1: Vignette 1 sample overview [14]

Germany and England were chosen as the national settings for this study because of their contrasting engagement with global "neoliberal" trends such as tuition fees, university rankings, and "managerialist" university governance in general (PRITCHARD, 2011). The interviews were conducted in the students' own language to improve both the interviews' validity and the likelihood of successful participant recruitment (as it transpired, only one of the participants would have been comfortable being interviewed in the other language). The vignettes were therefore also presented in German and English. This required care to be taken to ensure both formal and functional equivalence (CHAPMAN, 1979)—that both the semantic and conceptual conversion of the text were achieved (OSBORN, 2007). The interviews and the vignettes were also piloted in both languages before the data collection commenced in earnest, and the vignettes were found to work in the sense that the text was understood and engaged with. [15]

The particular focus of this vignette and subsequent interview discussions were around the nature of the relationship between the student and the university. This relationship is purported to be changing as universities in many countries increasingly compete for students, levy tuition fees, and are charged through governance technologies with maximizing student satisfaction. It is feared that these conditions are altering—or have already altered—the nature of what it means to be a student, with more and more of the responsibility for educational success being transferred from the student to the university (NAIDOO & JAMIESON, 2005). Scholars engaging with this topic have sought to apply a

range of metaphors to reflect a new, emerging role of the student, such as an almost entirely passive consumer, a more engaged type of customer or client, or a highly active scholarly apprentice (TIGHT, 2013). It should be noted that German state universities do not charge tuition fees and its universities are not particularly market-oriented, while the opposite is the case in England. The expectation may have been, based on the literature in this area, that the English students would be more passive than the Germans. This did transpire, but was not primarily due to the existence (or absence) of fees, rather a difference in each group's sense of somewhat dissimilar university cultures. For the English students, they saw the balance of responsibility for academic success as almost entirely their own, but that the university culture was one in which close interaction with academics played an integral part. The German students, in contrast, shouldered more responsibility for their own academic and intellectual development as their university and its staff played a relatively passive, subsidiary role (see BUDD, 2017a for a more detailed review of these findings). [16]

The vignette was a paraphrased extract from an American academic paper that claimed that the shift to a consumer-type there was more or less complete (see DELUCCHI & KORGEN, 2002, p.101):

> "The current [American academic] milieu is one in which students do not expect higher education to involve effort, challenge, or constructive criticism. Rather, they expect to be amused, to feel comfortable and to put forth little effort, to be rewarded liberally for self-disclosure, whatever its quality or form, and to be given high grades in return for paying tuition and showing up." [17]

The intention with this vignette was twofold. Firstly, its placement—approximately a third of the way into the first of the two semi-structured interviews—was after rapport had been developed and participants were engaged with talking about universities in general (DICICCO-BLOOM & CRABTREE, 2006). It foregrounded a move in the interview, away from an exploration of the participants' background and initial university-related choices (degree, university etc.) and towards the ways in which education at secondary school and university might differ. In the interview, the participants were simply told that the topic was shifting slightly, shown the vignette, and then asked if they had any thoughts or comments on it. Secondly, it drew out some of the key features of literature here, namely that students may have become passive recipients of a university education. [18]

This vignette was considered, as recommended in the literature, highly relevant to the topic (HUGHES & HUBY, 2004) and accessible to the students in terms of language and scenario (JENKINS et al., 2010); piloting the interview and vignette revealed that both were achieved. The initial quotation—despite describing higher education in the US—did not specify American students, but the inclusion of this, it was hoped, would create some distance (BARTER & RENOLD, 2000) between the scenario described and the participants' own experiences and understanding of university. It was, overall, hoped that this textual stimulus would provide a more suitable framing than asking, for example, whether the participants perhaps

recognized in themselves—or others—the passive, consumer type of student, and what kind of discussion/additional responses it might elicit. [19]

3.2 Responses to Vignette 1

The data considered here is drawn from only from the direct response to the vignette. It may be that the vignette had some influence on later aspects of the discussions, but isolating these without a clear reference back to it might be misleading and has therefore been avoided. It is likely, of course, that earlier discussions also influenced how participants reacted to the vignette, and no simple cause-effect relationship is assumed here. Nevertheless, it was possible to see that specific responses to the vignette were produced. These responses—as an interpretivist researcher would expect—were somewhat idiosyncratic, but what did emerge was a pattern of up to four types of position in relation to the vignette in the participants' accounts:

- Dismissal as exaggerated;
- Dismissal as false;
- Partial acceptance of certain aspects;
- Normative refutation. [20]

Only one participant included all four positions in their statements around the extract—nine of the students presented three kinds and three presented two. [21]

3.2.1 Exaggeration

The immediate reaction to the vignette from four of the participants was that it was "simply an exaggeration, I'd say" (Thomas, Feuerbach, sport), "polemic" (Michael, Feuerbach, sociology), or a "theatrical, television view of American universities" (Jack, Mill, civil engineering). Only one of the participants (Chili, Mill, civil engineering) backed up his position with evidence, citing popular online videos of university and other academic lectures, and that many American universities like Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) were well-known internationally and therefore their students were unlikely to resemble those in the extract. Their accusation of embellishment, as it happens, was justified: while the paper from which the extract was taken did claim that this was the case, their own data did not fully support the statement in that they also identified non-consumerist orientations in students. [22]

3.2.2 False

All of the participants—without any prompting from the interviewer—distanced their own experience from the purported situation in American universities. We may see here the potential usefulness of a non-accusatory vignette—the participants did not discuss this in relation to themselves, rather the degree/study experience as a whole. (Leaving the extract as applying to students in general might have worked, but this was not piloted.) Common across the group were at

least brief descriptions of how their university/degree required a considerable amount of effort: "If I come out with a [good grade] it's because I've worked hard and I deserve it" (Zachary, Mill, mathematics), or "you have to work hard here, be challenged" (Ahmed, Feuerbach, politics). Most of the participants spent relatively little time discussing the precise content of the vignette itself, but three discussed its components in detail. In addition to describing how much work was required, they also addressed at length aspects such as constructive criticism being central to improvement, how self-disclosure featured little in academic work, and/or that the quality of claims made by students had to be appropriately supported with suitable evidence, not simply anecdote. [23]

3.2.3 Partial acceptance

While the participants did say that their experience of university and students was unlike that in the vignette, nine further qualified their initial refutation with examples of where it might be partially true, while still maintaining that the broader reality was unlike that in the extract. Six participants thought that those without experience of university might see students in that way, but not once/if they had spent any time as a student. It was acknowledged in these cases that, from the outside, the fact that students might go drinking during the week, or be known for staying in bed late, could allow some to believe that this was largely what being a student consisted of. However, the reality, as they saw it, was more that student lifestyles were less regulated than standard employment, and that you still had to commit a similar volume of time, but how/when you did so was at your discretion. This, it was felt, helped to develop responsibility for one's own learning and time: the lifestyle "is partly about this kind of experience ... you have to have fun ... you're always invited out for a drink but at the same time you have a lot of [study] things that still need to be done" (Michael, Feuerbach, sociology). Five participants also thought that some students want/seek to get away with doing very little work, but that this was more the personal orientation of a minority rather than widespread (and not themselves, or that they admitted). Three felt that tuition fees, particularly high fees, might heighten the sense of entitlement or move the balance of effort more towards the university—fees for new students in England were due to rise from £3,000 to £9,000 shortly after the period when the interviews were conducted. One participant (Marie, Mill, physics), though, saw that fees provided students with "ammunition"—i.e., leverage—to address poor provision, but not to devolve responsibility. As another participant pointed out, though, tuition fees provide a "guarantee to provide me with the lectures, the books, the insights, so that I [can] achieve the degree, but what you get out of the degree is your responsibility" (Jo, Mill, psychology). [24]

3.2.4 Normative refutation

An interesting (and sought for) feature of eight of the thirteen accounts was that some critical response to the vignette could be considered normative, in that this "customer" orientation in students was, firstly, "a shame" (Lisa, Feuerbach, sociology), or "it *shouldn't* be like that" (Jo, Mill, psychology). The implication here is that passivity in students was inappropriate, a perspective justified by referring

to aspects of what we might consider an ethos—a "defensible set of educational aims and values" (McLAUGHLIN, 2005, p.320)—that underpinned universities and a university education (see BUDD, 2017b). In most cases, a student who saw no responsibility for their own education negated one of the principles and purposes of studying, which was to "become independent thinkers ... they don't tell you the answer ... they want you to think through the whole process yourself" (Anna, Feuerbach, electronic engineering). This was often connected with the notion that a degree should represent a period of achieving greater maturity, which incorporated taking responsibility for one's own learning and life. One student (Thomas, Feuerbach, sports science) saw fees as fundamentally problematic as they created a *quid pro quo* whereby the university became duty bound to play a more active role in student success, which he saw as "counter to the character of higher education". As mentioned earlier, the (fee-paying) English students saw their university as a more active partner than the Germans did, but this was more connected to different university cultures in those countries than tuition fees in themselves. [25]

3.2.5 Review

In review, it seems that this vignette was effective in the sense that students were able to engage with it, producing responses that related to the objects of inquiry. In spite of potentially being leading, the participants were able to unpick and relativize it, drawing contrasts (and some similarities) with their own experiences and often normative conceptualizations of how higher education was (or should be). It therefore provided an oeuvre to a specific aspect of the topic, with a non-accusatory position being created between the US context and their German/English one that may have been useful. It drew reactions from the participants that varied in type, offering both rich data and analytical outcomes that partially achieved the aims of the project. The aims were broader than this vignette, but it did allow a core aspect of the "student as customer" topic to be isolated and explored. It should also be mentioned that, contrary to CRAFTER et al.'s (2014) suggestion that vignettes should be less about the participants' reality than feelings and perceptions, this was not the intention or chief result here. It was hoped that the students would, firstly, describe their context as it compared the vignette (as detailed in Sections 3.2.1 to 3.2.3), and that secondly, they might comment on the inappropriateness of the passive student customer to higher education. In terms of the internal tensions described by O'DELL et al. (2012), these did not emerge in relation to this vignette, perhaps as the discussions around it were less related to participants' own decisions and opinions. These internal tensions (i.e., cognitive dissonance) did, though, emerge elsewhere in the project; some of the English students expressed at different points in the interviews, for example, that universities should not be profit-oriented in terms of research, but later that a profit orientation in terms of teaching and tuition fees was acceptable. (For a more detailed discussion of this, see BUDD, 2017b.) [26]

4. Vignette 2: Does Tolerance Foster Community Cohesion?

The project in which the second vignette was applied was also a small, qualitative study, but where the relationship between "tolerance" and community cohesion in Britain was being investigated. The pragmatic use of the term tolerance in (e.g. education) policy to initiate intergroup contact and sustain cohesion (BURTONWOOD, 2006) is problematic due to the contested meaning of tolerance regarding that it can (re-)produce an uneven power dynamic between the tolerator and the tolerated (BROWN, 2006). In this policy context, a sampling group from the British-Turkish community located in North West England was selected for a study analyzing the role of communities (AMENTA, NASH & SCOTT, 2012) and/or social groups as meso-level organizations (FINE & HALLETT, 2014) in fostering community cohesion. [27]

The particular focus of this vignette and its related questions were around the possibility of cohesion in diverse urban areas/neighborhoods. Cohesion is of particular interest due to its recent inclusion in government policy around ground level security concerns and preventing extremism (HOME OFFICE, 2011a, 2011b, 2015), and this has been supplemented by the promotion of "Fundamental British Values" in schools (DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION, 2011, 2014, 2015; HOME OFFICE, 2015). The objective here, it seems, is to influence in a particular way the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of young people at the discursive level (DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION, 2014). Scholars engaging with this topic have seen intergroup contact between majority and minority groups, initiated with tolerance, as an effective way to foster cohesion (BURTONWOOD, 2006; NORTON & DE HAAN, 2013). However, the power dynamic embedded in tolerance (JONES, 2010; LÆGAARD, 2010; MARCUSE, 1969 [1965]; ORTEZA Y MIRANDA, 1994) may, through its "depoliticization", first hamper contact and then cohesion because it naturalizes a process of "[marking] subjects of tolerance as inferior, deviant or marginal vis-à-vis those practicing tolerance" (BROWN, 2006, p.13). In the event of tension between groups, tolerance alone may not suffice in sustaining intergroup relations due to this perceived/actual power dynamic that subordinates or marginalizes one or more groups. The notion of tolerance, particularly in this policy context, therefore needs to be critically examined. [28]

4.1 Sampling and interview methodology in Study 2

The construction of the sample for the study had a purposive sampling approach in the small-scale case study (BRYMAN, 2015, pp.408; STAKE, 2005, pp.451). A small-scale case study approach allowed the researcher (KANDEMIR) to explore the plurality of meanings of tolerance and question whether or not tolerance can be applied in fostering community cohesion in Britain through its legitimation in the public-political and policy discourse. Due to the object of inquiry in this study, the case study was utilized to allow the researcher to use such research methods as "interviewing, observing, and document analysis" (DENZIN & LINCOLN, 2013, p.29). In doing so, three key categories were of particular importance, namely ethno-religious origin, generation and educational status—this draws from the

findings of existing literature and research questions of this study. These categories were significant in investigating the role of tolerance in the promotion of community cohesion. For instance, Turkish ethnic and ascribed Muslim origin groups remain under-investigated in the debates on tolerance and community cohesion (DIKICI, 2016; TANYAS, 2012). Also, there may be different understandings and implications of tolerance and community cohesion for the first and second generation of this specific minority group as in any other minority group (HAW, 2009). Additionally, the educational status of first generation (i.e., parents) of this group may play an important role at different levels in comprehension, conveyance, and application of tolerance. [29]

Additional categories were also considered such as the age range of the young participants. The initial age range of 14-18 was targeted for the purpose of this study, and this was expanded slightly for two reasons. First, age 13 (even 12) is still within early secondary education in which religious education and citizenship education are taught. These two course subjects were of particular importance as those were the ones that were initially looked at to establish whether or not the fundamental British values—and tolerance—are formally taught. Second, 19 was an age that was still closer to secondary education and at this age, people should be able to recall the teaching of the concerned course subjects. Second, they were among the community members who were accessed and agreed to participate in the project. A snowball recruitment method (BRYMAN, 2015, p.415) was also utilized in order to expand the sampling group. Through this method, not only were other people not active in the community accessed, but also others from more varied religious, ethnic, and class backgrounds. [30]

The interview methodology was based on semi-structured interviews with open-ended interview questions as obtaining brief responses in participants' responses was not the intention (BRYMAN, 2015, p.244). Rather, it was hoped that more in-depth answers, embellished with interviewees' perspectives, would be elicited in line with the abstract and complex concepts under investigation. [31]

The study's broader sampling group was large, including young people, parents, third sector representatives, and a government official (22 participants in total). However, the vignettes were only applied in the interviews with the young participants. The age range selected, between 13 and 19, had particular importance and relevance for the research question since this group had been directly targeted within government policies around tolerance and cohesion (DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION, 2014). It was hoped that the ways in which young people are affected by these policies, and the role of informal education (through community organizations), could be explored. [32]

This age group, it was believed, should be sufficiently mature to comprehend tolerance as an abstract phenomenon, but would not yet have encountered the independent learning and critical thinking that are more characteristic of higher education in England/the UK. However, during the pilot study, it was established that tolerance was still quite an abstract concept for this age group—their understanding of it was either limited or difficult to elicit directly. As a result, the

vignette was created and the interview questions amended. Because the vignette was devised after the completion of pilot study, it was not tested before the data collection commenced. Seven young British-Turks—four female, three male—(see Table 2, below) were interviewed, once each, in their own language (English), to discuss interrelated topics such as the notion of Britishness, social cohesion, and tolerance[2]. All of the participants were aged from 13 to 17, were at various stages in their secondary school education, and had British and often dual (i.e., also Turkish) citizenship. In terms of parental ethnicity, all had at least one Turkish parent, with the second parent having roots in one of a number of other countries (except two of the participants whose both parents were ethnically Turkish).

Name	**Gender**	**Age**	**Ethnic origin (maternal-paternal) and citizenship**
Participant 1	Female	14	British-Turkish Dual (British-Turkish) citizenship
Participant 2	Female	14	British-Turkish Dual (British-Turkish) citizenship
Participant 3	Female	13	Portuguese-Turkish Dual (British-Turkish) citizenship
Participant 4	Female	15	Turkish Dual (British-Turkish) citizenship
Participant 5	Male	17	Turkish-Afghan British citizenship
Participant 6	Male	14	Turkish-Afghan British citizenship
Participant 7	Male	13	Turkish Dual (British-Turkish) citizenship

Table 2: Vignette 2 sample overview [33]

The vignette below was created by Aslı KANDEMIR with a view to unpacking this topic. It takes the form of a story depicting a conflict-generating situation between three young people in a deprived and ethnically diverse neighborhood in the participant's home city. The people in the vignette were adapted each time to match those of the participant, and Parts 1 and 2 were presented consecutively (as in McKEGANEY et al., 1996).

2 Originally, eight young participants were interviewed and presented with the vignette. However, one participant withdrew from the study eight months after the interview date. Therefore, during the writing process of the first version of this article, the data from that participant's interview and its interpretation was removed.

> Part 1: Let's imagine that you have (Jessica/Jack) and (Ayşe/Mehmet). (Jessica/Jack) is a (same aged) white, Christian, English, (boy/girl, same gender). (Ayşe/Mehmet) is an Other White, Muslim, British born (same gender) of Turkish descent of the same age. They go to the same comprehensive school, which is in a deprived neighborhood in (city). They live in that neighborhood which is also highly diverse. (Jessica's/Jack's) and (Ayşe's/Mehmet's) parents do not interact with each other. In fact, they do not know each other even though they are next-door neighbors.
>
> *Question 1: Do you think that (Jessica/Jack) and (Ayşe/Mehmet) could be friends in that case?*
>
> Part 2: (Jessica/Jack) and (Ayşe/Mehmet) are friends and, in the school, they always hang around together. They get on well. Yet, when they go home to their neighborhood, (Jessica/Jack) prefers to meet her/his other friends who are like her/him, and (Ayşe/Mehmet) does the same. One day, (Jessica/Jack) is threatened by a third girl/boy who is also (the same age), white, Christian, and English.
>
> *Question 2: In that case, what do you think that (Ayşe's/Mehmet's) reaction would be?*
>
> *Question 3: In the contrary case, if the threatened (girl/boy) was (Ayşe/Mehmet), what do you think what (Jessica's/Jack's) reaction would be if the same happened to (Ayşe/Mehmet) by another (same aged) Other White, Muslim, British-Turkish girl/boy?* [34]

The purpose of this vignette was threefold. First, it offered a way of operationalizing, implicitly, the notions of tolerance and cohesion. There is, specifically in Part 1, an inter-group relationship—an example of tolerance used as a tool to initiate this relationship, although with that cohesion not extending beyond the school. Part 2 provides a test of that tolerance between young people who might associate more with each other in the school environment than outside school hours. Question 3, in inverting the roles, investigates the notion of the power relationship being exchanged to explore whether tolerance-driven inter-group relationships can be sustained among young people where conflicts arise. Second, the placement of the vignette at the end of a longer interview was intended to potentially juxtapose/compare their prior responses to those previous questions but in a concrete situation. This would, it was hoped, allow the researcher to achieve more credibility in the data by verifying how participants comprehended the notions of cohesion and tolerance. Finally, this vignette sought to provide distance between the participants and the concepts under investigation by presenting a third-party, less accusatory scenario (BARTER & RENOLD, 2000), while still providing a situation with which participants could identify (HUGHES & HUBY, 2004). Interestingly, as it transpired, many of the participants placed themselves within the situation itself by adopting the ethnic minority role, and this is discussed in due course. [35]

4.2 Responses to Vignette 2

The data considered here is also drawn from the direct responses to the vignette, which was placed at the very end of the interview. It therefore enabled the researcher to analyze the data drawn from these direct responses, although it should be acknowledged, as in the previous case, that prior interview discussions may well have flavored their responses to the vignette. However, the placement of this vignette at the end of the interview, with the three sections placed consecutively (a la McKEGANEY et al., 1996), to some extent should have isolated the subsequent discussions. Responses to this vignette were classified into three types:

- From tolerance to friendship;
- Reducing the distance;
- Filling in the gaps. [36]

Six of eight participants covered all three types in their responses regarding the scenario. Two of them covered two types, each of them with a different set of two categories. [37]

4.2.1 From tolerance to friendship

Friendship and its role in fostering community cohesion stood out as a normative response in all of the responses to the vignette, but friendship in fact replaced tolerance in some ways. Every participant described how friendship should be, or described it as showing solidarity when necessary. For them, the aspects presented in the vignette such as "going to the same school" and "being next door neighbors" inevitably denoted a level of friendship. Even if some of the participants did not specifically define what friendship was and how it was generated, they all prioritized friendship over the abstract or more theoretical concept of tolerance as a chief constituent of cohesion. According to the participants, friendship necessitates mutual contact, a contact that, to them, meant knowing each other more closely, and automatically implied trust and, subsequently, cohesion. This trust, they felt, was maintained through friendship between young people, and could then result in interaction between parents. It could therefore strengthen the relations between young people and adults, both in the school and in the community. Participant 7, for example, stated that:

> "[...] obviously, if you go to the same school, you basically are [much] closer to each other. So if Mehmet and Jack become friends, then possibly their parents will know each other and then maybe they all will be friends. [...] And that can cause another peaceful and more understanding society." [38]

This finding implies that the use of the term friendship could provide a more accessible approach in initiating and sustaining contact, trust, and cohesion because it was seen to represent equality between parties rather than the imbalanced power dynamic inherent in tolerance. The suggestion then follows

that friendship, as a more every day and egalitarian concept than tolerance, could potentially be better operationalized in policy discourse. [39]

4.2.2 Reducing the distance

It was interesting to see that seven of the eight participants placed themselves directly within the scenario, as if it was a lived experience for them; only one participant retained the third-person distance. For instance, Participant 3 embraced the context and responded sincerely in reference to her own decision-making: "The girls are their own person and they can make friends with whoever they wish." Participant 4 also embraced the context and responded in reference to how she personally would feel in that situation, although she put that emotional state on the person in the scenario: "She should be shocked and try and help Jessica out and solve the problem maybe." [40]

In spite of the generation of distance in the vignette through a third-party scenario, that most of the participants adopted the position of the Turkish youngster in the scenario indicates that the vignette was both accessible and realistic. This occurred without any encouragement from the researcher. It was possible in this study to capture the dialogical cultural identities referred to by O'DELL et al. (2012), where the dominant identity shifts depending on the scenario. Participant 3 strongly foregrounded her gender identity while empathizing with the character in the vignette. The importance of her gender identity as a young woman was quite dominant, and featured elsewhere in her responses. In responding to Question 1, she not only reduced the distance with the character, but there was also interplay among cultural identities, since she responded to Question 3 from an ethno-religious position. Although that ethno-religious position did not seem too crucial for her, she observed in real life that it was crucial for others in society. Therefore, she incorporated others' perception of people who are different from he ethno-religiously. [41]

Participant 4 added her hyphenated ethnic identity when she responded to Question 3, stating that Jessica would not get involved to resolve the conflict because the characters in conflict were both from the same religion, i.e., both Ayşe and the bullying girl were presumably Muslims. Similar to the findings of CRAFTER et al. (2014), it can be observed here that dialogical cultural identity of this participant emerged while her self-perception of Muslims and others' perception of Muslims interacted in answering the question. In fact, even though, in her response to Question 2, she not only put emotion on the character of the vignette as her own emotion, she also channeled a different voice in the latter response. That is, that she channeled the voice of a general (i.e., human) identity in the first response whereas she channels her own ethno-religious identity in the second. This means that, as suggested by O'DELL et al. (2012), her central voice shifted towards the more dominant identity emerging differently according to the context. It does not seem that these two voices of two positions, being human and being British-Turkish Muslim, were in conflict for her. However, she acknowledged the potential that an external conflict between human identity and ethno-religious

identity may occur in the perception of others who are not Turkish or not Muslim when they evaluate the conflict situation between these two parties. [42]

4.2.3 Filling in the gaps

The participants' enriching of the scenario in line with their own experience was another notable response to the vignette. Half of the participants added further detail to the scenario, which, for them, was needed to fill gaps and present a more coherent case to enable further explanation and discussion. They invented further parts of the scenario with certain details such as the setting of the conflict and the profiles of the young people. Occasionally, they responded to the questions with hypothetical conditions that would affect the way that the scenario might play out in reality. As mentioned earlier, the questions were designed to elicit information with regards to the possible reaction of the main characters in the vignette in case that they were threatened by other young people with a similar ethno-religious identity. Participant 5 responded to Questions 2 and 3 as follows

> "I feel like it would even depend on the person. Some people are [...] like watchers, some people are action-takers. [...] I feel like both of them should intervene and help each other out and not think about their religion and any source [...]." [43]

The important aspect of this position is that the participants are aware that the vignette may not completely represent reality, and their additions indicate their awareness of this and that different additions/details affect the consequences/outcomes. [44]

4.2.4 Review

In summary, the use of this vignette elicited rich responses relevant to the research question. As evidenced in the data, the participants engaged with the vignette so intimately that they even added further details and placed themselves in the context itself. As an experiential vignette depicting a specific scenario and different positions, the signifiers for the interviewees were the actual people named and possessing certain character traits. It was established in the pilot study for this research that participants in the 13-19 age bracket found it difficult to conceptualize or unpack the notion of tolerance by itself through direct questioning. It seems that, through approaching this topic indirectly with a vignette, a conceptualization/unpacking was facilitated and the participants were able to articulate a more egalitarian form of relationship—friendship—where power was more evenly shared than tolerance implies. [45]

The emergence of the notion of friendship also has implications for the data analysis on the project as a whole. The data analysis was initially more theoretically-informed, with coding primarily drawn from aspects of the literature. However, the participants' normative contributions around friendship, for example, ensured that the data analysis is not constricted by a more narrow theoretical framing (see THOMAS, 2002). By way of explanation, the critical theory focus on tolerance (e.g., BROWN, 2006; MARCUSE, 1969 [1965]) is as the embodiment

of an imbalanced power dynamic leading towards hegemony of one community or self over the other. The participants' focus on friendship introduces a new concept, potentially removing the requirement for tolerance from the discussions of social cohesion. Friendship does feature in the literature (FORREST & KEARNS, 2001) but it has been largely overlooked or somewhat neglected by scholars to date. The implication of this for more effective individual and inter-group relationships and social cohesion—and, potentially policy—seems to warrant further consideration. It may suggest, for example, that the broader liberal democratic assumption of the need for tolerance for a cohesive society needs rethinking. [46]

5. Conclusion

In this article we hope we have achieved our three intended aims. First, we have suggested that a synthesis and broadening of the somewhat conflicting, or over-specific, definitions of vignettes is more helpful than more exclusive iterations. Vignettes can be applied within a range of research designs, in various forms, and can be utilized to elicit responses on a range of topics. The literature to date has not reflected their potential breadth of application, rather focusing on the specific kind of research in which they were applied in individual research projects. Vignettes appear to be a valuable resource within the panoply of tools available to researchers. They can, it is clear, be suited to both quantitative or qualitative approaches, be fictional or real/realistic, and can be used to address a variety of research topics and objects of inquiry. [47]

Second, we reviewed the "ground rules" suggested for the application of vignettes, and it seems that a number of factors—from ensuring internal validity to considering their placement within the research design—can be taken into account when using them in research. It should be noted, though, that very few authors in the studies cited reported any systematic comparison of these measures, and as such, it is not possible to draw up a definitive list of "what works" (and, equally, what does not). Furthermore, as we have sought to illustrate in our review of the literature and our research, vignettes can be applied in a wide variety of forms and research designs in line with the requirements of individual projects. In this sense, perhaps the only hard and fast rule might be to conduct a pilot study. [48]

Finally, in this article, we have sought to highlight how two contrasting types of vignette were actually applied in qualitative interviews, and how this then elicited different kinds of data. The first, a provocative stereotype of passive students as customers, was unpacked and engaged with by German and English undergraduates. The vignette was, on the one hand largely rejected as counter to their experience, while on the other hand we could see a normative refutation of this stereotype, in that they identified a "student-customer" position as inappropriate to the nature, or ethos, of higher education. The second vignette was a real-life but hypothetical scenario in which the nature of the relationship between young British people of different ethnicities was questioned. Again, a high level of engagement with the vignette was observed, and a different kind of

normative response emerged, with friendship expressed as a more accessible and balanced relationship than the tolerance suggested in both the literature and UK social/educational policy. Also, participants often placed themselves and their experiences within the scenario, adding or embellishing it in their discussions. The intention with both vignettes was, in part, to unpack complex, nuanced topics that have attracted much scholarly debate, and render some of this complexity more accessible. In both cases, this seems to have been achieved. This is not to say that the absence of a vignette may not have done so, but we can see that the application of vignettes did indeed function as intended. [49]

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